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*From New York “a contemporary Jezebel” and Beyond: The Representation and Impact of Black
Women in Reality Television*

By

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Abstract

My research will focus on how media representation of Black women affects the understanding of one's identity. Throughout history media representation of Black has been marginalized and when there is representation it is often presented with a negative connotation. With this study I will be using, Black feminist theory to deconstruct the way that Black women are viewed in the media and the impact that society's representation has on people's understanding of themselves. I will specifically be looking at reality television due to its growth in popularity within the 21st century and the prominent representation of black women specifically in reality television versus other forms of media. I plan to undertake this research by conducting interviews and surveys with Black female students here at Ohio State and as well at other universities. I am interested in understanding why representation is important and specifically what type of representation is important when shaping identities. While reality television has been able to provide a representative platform for many Black women what does it mean when they representations are typically negative and violent. I am interested to see how young Black women interact with this type of media and what impact it has on them.

Introduction

With technology allowing for a more intimate view of people's lives than ever before reality television is just one aspect of being included with the lives of the rich and famous. Yet, how much reality is this "reality"? With people living extravagant lifestyles and hardly ever being shown having a career the "reality" that is often presented on television tends to be far from the reality of its viewers. Being a millennial, (The Nielsen Report, 2013) (The Nielsen Report, 2013) media has been a very integral part of my upbringing. However, this alongside my social justice and academic interests cause me to continuously question the media that I am consuming. Black women are so heavily featured in reality television but yet it is hard to find those images existing in other forms spaces. I was interested in understanding the impact that this has on my peers and what these types of images, typically seen as negative, implicate.

With the impact that media representation is able to have it is important to recognize the types of images that are being displayed. This is particularly necessary when looking at marginalized people. With the history of racist stereotypes that have been projected upon Black people for the past few centuries it is necessary that images are being presented to combat years of oppression. The media seems to only conform to these racist, outdated ideals forcing society to call into question the progress that may or may have not been made. Furthermore, it forces people to look at the impact on the categories of people that are being portrayed particularly on top of the marginalization that has existed and continues to exist.

By recognizing the type of platform that reality television has been able to provide Black women I became interested in understanding how young, Black women interact with this type

of media. These thoughts led me to pose the question: How does media representation of Black women affect the understanding of one's identity?

To answer these questions, it is important to have an understanding of both identity theory and Black feminist theory. Using these theories while undertaking the research will help in my understanding of how people relate to media. It will also serve to explain what is seen in media and how it is viewed and how it should be viewed by the general public. In order to understand how the media should be viewed the audience must understand the messages that the media supports and how it fits into a societal context. Being that Black women are a marginalized group and portrayals are limited when reality television is often depicting them, particularly over scripted television, the audience must be able to differentiate what is real and what is fake.

Literature Review

In understanding the way in which Black women consume and relate to media it is necessary to have an understanding of Identity Theory, Black feminist theory, media representation and how it specifically relates to reality television. Identity Theory serves to explain individual's behaviors within various roles (Burke and Stets, 2000). Roles are believed to be hierarchically organized and those at the top of the structure have more power to define their own roles and identity than those at the bottom. When discussing Black women who are undoubtedly at the bottom of the hierarchy their stories are often not told and when they are it is oftentimes by those that aren't Black women. It is under Identity Theory that the idea of "master statuses" originates from. These are attributes that often override other characteristics that a person may possess. They typically fall along the lines of categories such as race, gender,

and sexuality. However, for Black women there is not one “master” status as both their race and gender work together in various contexts to impact their roles (Hogg et. al 2000).

This idea of identities not being able to necessarily “overpower” the other because different aspects of oppression work together and intersect is under Kimberle Crenshaw’s theory of “intersectionality”. Crenshaw recognizes that, “If any real efforts are to be made to free Black people of the constraints and conditions that characterize racial subordination, then theories and strategies purporting to reflect the Black community’s needs must include an analysis of sexism and patriarchy” (1989). Crenshaw’s take on the approach needs to be applied to Black women’s role in media, as well. It is necessary to take a view that critiques racist sexism and how it impacts the viewership.

Black women are not given the privilege of enjoying media because it consistently supports white supremacy. It is because of this that bell hooks encourages readers to use what she calls the oppositional gaze (hooks, 1992). This type of view forces viewers to take a political perspective as they do not see themselves in the media. According to hooks it is something that is necessary to take because Black women are not given the privilege to be viewed in the dominant gaze (hooks, 1992). When the Black woman’s existence is counter culture it is not surprising that the media’s portrayals are poor.

Historically, there have been three major media representations of Black women. These portrayals are characterized by the jezebel, mammy, and sapphire. None of these portrayals provide holistic views of the Black woman. While literature surrounding these portrayals typically refers scripted television these concepts can still be applied to reality television as well. They work to dehumanize Black women are merely caricatures of what Black women

actually are. The Jezebel is a hyper-sexualized character who is presented as someone that is unable to control her sexual desires. This presentation was created to depict Black women as having an inability to be raped (Brown, 2013). Contemporarily, the Jezebel is the “hyperfertile Black baby momma on daytime television talk shows”, the “freak”, or the “video vixen” (West, 2017). The Mammy exists on the exact opposite end of the spectrum from the Jezebel is vastly different from that of the mammy. The Mammy is someone who has no sex appeal or sexual desires at all. Her main purpose is to serve white families and their children. Her character is often portrayed by someone who is older, dark-skinned, and overweight which lies far outside the conventional norms of Western beauty (Brown, 2013). Throughout the course of history this character has transitioned into what is seen as the Matriarch or Strong Black Woman (West, 2017). While her role has transitioned from caring for white families, she continues to lack a sense of independence as her growth is solely connected to the growth of others. This type of portrayal takes away the Black woman’s individuality both personally and sexually. Finally, the Sapphire is often seen as over-bearing and obnoxious. Today, this character is often seen in film and television as the “Angry Black Woman”. The Sapphire consistently rejects love and is independent to the point that the audience is meant to find it unappealing. Her character is often changed by a man that ultimately makes her more approachable demonstrating that there were flaws in her old ways. (Brown, 2013) However, there is consistently no context given to these characters and their behaviors. “This portrayal can be used to silence and shame Black women who dare to challenge social inequalities, complain about their circumstances, or demand fair treatment” (West, 2017). In the present day, this is the most popular portrayal of Black women and they work to justify when violence is taken against Black women because

they provide imaging that makes it seem that Black women are instinctively difficult (West, 2017).

These tropes though different are similar as they all serve as ways to dehumanize Black women. These characterizations all depict that Black women are unable to express their emotions and are shallow. The longevity in the display of such images and the fact that they are still being seen today aligns with how white supremacy continues to perpetuate itself with and through media further allowing a misunderstanding of Black women to be shared to the masses. So, who are viewing these negative portrayals? Research has shown that Black youth watch significantly more television than their white counterparts (Adams-Bass, Bentley-Edwards, & Stevenson, 2014). While over time these differences decrease during the senior year of high school Black students are more likely to watch television in comparison to both their white and Hispanic counterparts (Table 1). The television viewership for Black youth is not opposite from Black viewers in general as Black people watch more TV than any other racial group. According to a 2013 Nielsen Report Black people watch a significant 37% more television than any other group with Black women watching more television than Black men (Table 2).

Due to various media forms, Black women are able to see themselves presented more than they ever have before (Adams-Bass, Bentley-Edwards, & Stevenson, 2014). With this being said what is known as “media socialization” becomes even more relevant. The research of Adams-Bass et. al defines media socialization as “the exposure to mass communication messages such as television, radio, the Internet, and newspapers; messages that teach people socially acceptable behaviors” (2014). When television has the power to teach socially

acceptable behavior it must be understood what this means when the images presented are only reality for a select few.

Something that is called to question in this research is how much Black women are being exploited and how much of their work is a part own autonomy. It has been found that the depictions are problematic as they do not actually express the actual reality of Black women (Adams-Bass, Bentley-Edwards, & Stevenson, 2014). While reality television does depict Black women, there is a difference that exists is the overall depiction of Black women and their white counterparts. While, white women are depicted in a foolish manner on reality television the vast amount of other programming balances out what one may see on a program such as *Jersey Shore: Family Reunion*. However, while the programming that Black women are featured in is slowly rising there is still not enough content to balance the depictions that are frequently seen on programs like *Real Housewives of Atlanta* and *Basketball Wives* (Davis, 2015). With the success of *Flavor of Love* in 2006 a shift in Black programming began (Pearce, 2014). The show spawning several spin-offs leading to even more spin-offs demonstrated the space that could be made for Black programming and consequently viewership. This recognition was not lost on the network, VH1, and their Black viewership went from 11.21% to 40% while their white viewership dropped from 76.32% to 50% from 2007-2011 (Pearce, 2014) (Table 3). Particularly, when looking at VH1 it becomes apparent the difference in appeal of “white” reality television shows versus “Black” ones. VH1 was able to tap into the Black market and capitalize. According, to the same Nielsen report referenced earlier VH1 holds the second highest Black viewership, only after Black Entertainment Television (BET) (Table 4). With half of the top programming that Black viewers watch being reality television it is necessary to analyze the types of images that

are being consumed (Table 5). One cannot naively consume these images with the type of impact that media can have on society.

Methods

In order to understand how Black women, interact with reality television and the messages that it presents it was important that I actually engaged with young, Black women. This being the case I interviewed young, Black women in order to get honest opinions to understand the true impact reality television. I was interested in interviewing various women in order to see how people from different backgrounds were able to see themselves represented in television. While undertaking this research I was able to recruit 12 young women to participate. These women varied from close friends, to acquaintances, and mutual friends. Being that I am a Black woman and my circle mainly consists of Black women it was not hard to find those with similar interests as me.¹ All of the women that I interviewed are either college educated (two participants) or working on completing their college education (ten participants). While, Black women are the most educated group, by percentage, in comparison to other groups this is not an accurate representation of America with Black Americans having the smallest percentage of citizens with degrees (Table 6).

Being that all of the participants are college educated it allows them to have been in a space where they have learned how to take in various opinions that may have differed from their upbringing. Furthermore, it allows them to have been able to have learned how to analyze

¹ A limitation of this may be that being that I knew majority of the participants I could have catered the clarifying questions in ways that would allow them to provide answers that I may have been looking for. While this was not intentional for some participants knowing their interests and backgrounds it could have been a natural response.

and critique images from an academic standpoint. This is a privilege that many media consumers do not have. This allows the participants to view the media in a way that may be different than the creators have intended for it to be viewed, which is a space of privilege. In addition, it allowed for my interview questions to be at a college-level and I had confidence that my participants would have the context and formal education to understand what was expected with my questions.

In order to keep my participant's answers honest all of the interviews were recorded anonymously. This was done in order to ensure that the participants felt comfortable sharing their truth. This is also why the interviews were conducted on an individual basis. While in focus groups people are able to build off of other participants thoughts I wanted each participant's opinions to be their own and I wanted them to feel comfortable enough to share intimate information, if it reached that point. I interviewed 12 people in hopes of getting around 6 hours of conversation. This means that each interview would be around 30 minutes long. While some were longer than this there were a few that were shorter. While, I was searching to pull out more information from the participants at some points everything that could have been said was said. I believe that even if the interviews were under 30 minutes that they were still exhaustive just based on the participant.

My participants were all in the age range of 18-24. I chose this specific group because they are all young adults and will have had to ability to have grown up on reality television. This allowed them to experience a difference between consuming media as a child versus an adult. Furthermore, it allows them to be more critical of what they are consuming because they have more life experience and different life expectations than that of a child.

Being that I was looking at the impact of reality television on its actual viewers it was most relevant for me to undertake qualitative research. Using interviews as my research method allowed me to actually gauge the true feelings of young, Black women and not just numbers that may be reported on how Black women are represented and the potential impacts of that without understanding the true sentiments.

Results

Reality television is meant to depict people's true lives. Yet, for many people, what they see on television is anything but reality. Watching people constantly fighting, living above their means, always wearing a full face of makeup and having multiple cosmetic surgery operations, it is hard to understand whose reality is actually being shown. With Black women's faces being so heavily seen in this specific form of media, the question of representation needs to be discussed particularly because Black women are not often featured in other forms of media. What is being said when the main form of representation of Black women are portrayals that are typically deemed as negative? If one does not know Black women personally, then they may believe that this is how all Black women act. Additionally, Black women could possibly feel further marginalized in the way they are presented.

The average age of my participants first exposure to reality television was 12.75 years old, with the ages ranging from 8 to 17. At this age, a child is most likely in the 7th grade and is still very impressionable. Still at the beginning stages of adolescence the brain still needs a lot of time to fully develop and separating fact from fiction is more difficult (Knox, 2010). So, when people are watching this type of programming they are more likely to take in what is being

presented as reality and as something that they then need to emulate. Being that all of the women interviewed are adults they are not as impressionable and had to draw back on their history to remember how they were impacted when it was brought up all could note a difference in their viewership as a child versus that as an adult.

Of the 12 women who participated in the study, only one woman said she saw herself reflected in this type of programming. She did not give a resounding “no” to this initial question. Her “yes” had limitations and was largely based on racial and ethnic identity. While identifying as a part of a racial/ethnic group is a major identifying factor it takes away a person’s individuality and typically assigns them roles that are defined elsewhere. Whereas her personality traits or other aspects of her personal life that could have been represented in this form of media, seemingly are not. This reasoning is why the other participants did not find the Black women featured to be depictions of themselves. With such a large portion of Black women on television being represented on reality programming, it is important that they should represent, at least in some regard, the common woman. However, that has not been the case and continues not to be the case. There are several reasons as to why women are not able to relate to the women who are depicted on reality television. A relevant structural issue often recognized is class. While the various cast members may not actually be wealthy, it is fundamental to their image that they appear to be. This can be evident with *Real Housewives of Atlanta* cast member purchasing \$3,500 shoes while only receiving \$5,000 in alimony from her husband at the time (Nelson, 2015) Portraying this type of image separates these women from the average American, which again calls into question whose reality is being shown. If the average American is not able to emulate this lifestyle, what are viewers supposed to be taking

in? This focus on materialism is demonstrated in various series, such as the *Love and Hip-Hop* franchise and the *Real Housewives* franchise. When a majority of these women live in mansions and are able to purchase purses that cost thousands of dollars, they are separating themselves from the average American—particularly when the viewership is Black women, and Black people generally have a lower income and have lower net worth than other racial and ethnic groups (Table 7).

The focus on class is not something that the participants were immune to. Several participants noted the vast difference in the cast member's wealth than their own. One participant stated, "In the future I need to have money but I want to make it on my own. I don't want to be dependent on a man but [the shows] reiterate a luxurious lifestyle." She goes on to state that because of the luxurious lifestyle presented she also wants to embody that way of life in the present day. With these "everyday" people being able to achieve success and wealth through unconventional means and their lifestyles being on display it is hard for a viewer, particularly a young adult who is in a stage of constant change, to not be impacted in some regard.

Similar to traditional Hollywood stars, the body images of reality television stars are typically unrealistic for the average woman. With the rise of Black women in the media, a curvier body, often associated with reality television star Kim Kardashian—who is ironically not a Black woman, is more desired. However, these bodies are often achieved by surgery or with consistent work outs with a personal trainer. Both methods can take significant time and money, which the average woman may not be able to devote. With these women being able to have their makeup professionally done on a daily basis, their standard of attractiveness shown

is essentially unachievable. One participant noted that she began to internalize these ideals of what she was seeing on television. With the weave, waist trainers, and heavy makeup it is almost impossible to achieve the standards that are being set. For another participant that already has an interest in different aspects of fashion this only fuels her current interests. Being able to stay up to date on the latest trends just further propels her desires. The impact is so large that she is actually a patron of a hairstylist on *Love and Hip Hop: Atlanta*. The fact that one participant is a patron demonstrates the level of prestige that is associated with these stars. There is a level of respect given to someone who has celebrity clients and being able to service these establishments lessens the gap between those seen on TV and the average person. This makes the “reality” seem more real.

Another interviewee was aware of how media portrayals can impact those around her, but explicitly stated that she did not care about the hair type and complexions frequently seen on reality television. Being a dark-skinned woman with natural hair growing up, there were not, and still are not, many images of these women existing on television. This touches on a very important point: that even when Black women are represented on television, it has historically been only one “type” of Black woman. This woman is of a lighter complexion and if her hair is not straight it is of a loose curl pattern among the likes of Zendaya, Amandla Stenberg, and Tessa Thompson. However, what reality television has the potential to do is allow a range of body types and complexions be shown in the media. While, this can be seen it is not what is being presented. Although the types of images that are presented now may vary from those of 20 years ago, the expectations are still unrealistic and colorism persists. So, while we may see various shades of Black people when the typical representations are of light skinned women

and dark-skinned women are more often portrayed in a negative light the implications of these negative images must be discussed when looking to create change.

All women, and particularly Black women, tend to fulfill certain stereotypes, and reality television is no exception. These stereotypes were not lost on the sample population, and this called into question who is producing these shows and allowing the stereotypes to be perpetuated. Several of the participants called into question the work of Mona Scott-Young. Scott-Young is the executive producer of the infamous *Love and Hip-Hop* series, which started out as one show in New York and has spawned several spin-offs. As a Black woman, she has been able to gain success by profiting from the questionable portrayals of Black women. In her shows, a luxurious lifestyle and lack of sisterhood are frequently presented. The fact that this Black woman is seemingly “selling out” her own people for her own individual success is critical. While many of the participants were familiar with Scott-Young, some were not and were surprised to find out that a Black woman oversees the franchise because they had assumed the production team consisted of white men. With this in mind one participant stated that it is “Better for a Black person to do it than a White person. [She] could produce anything but [she’s] doing it for a check” as one Black woman’s success is better than none. Many of the participants found it critical that to change what the public sees, there has to be a change of who is producing what we see. The common belief was that the producers have the power and the stars are just pawns of a larger system. Yet, what one participant noted is that even when there is a Black woman at the head of a franchise, like Scott-Young, when the production team is still full of white people the same type of “negative” content tends to be produced. The

lower-level producers are able to continue to control content that is putting Black people on display, and do so by further instigating situations during filming instead of diffusing them.

Mona Scott-Young is not the only Black, female producer on television. Both Shaunie O'Neal and Shonda Rhimes are producers of shows with Black women in the leading roles. Like Scott-Young, Shaunie O'Neal produces a television show that can be found on VH1. However, Rhimes does not produce reality television and has several scripted shows that air on ABC. When looking at the types of shows that these women produce there is a vast difference in what is expected and the type of control that one has. Several interviewees noted that Rhimes brings to the screen positive characters that serve to empower them. Rhimes producing scripted shows and owning her production studio allow her to have more control over the content that is being shared.

What is seen here is that money is truly the motive. The importance of money was discussed in several interviews and was used as the main justification for Scott-Young's exploitation of "her" people. This goes to show how capitalism impacts people's lives and though it has been not set up in favor of Black people one can still use it as a means to achieve individual success. However, when this individual success is founded upon perpetuating oppressive stereotypes of Black women it becomes problematic. With 5 participants recognizing the impact of money on what is being produced it becomes obvious that in the words of Tia Tyree, "The reality of reality television is that the programming is not real" (Tyree, 2011).

While reality stars are who the public is familiar with, they do not have power over how they are viewed unless they have production credits. When looking from a historical lens, it

continues to show a lack of autonomy that Black women have had over their own bodies. From the story of Sarah Baartman, infamously known as Hottentot Venus, Black women's bodies have been on display for white viewing for centuries. Sarah Baartman was a South African woman whose body was put in exhibits known as "freak shows" around Europe (Parkinson, 2016). She was consistently forced to expose herself because of her round buttocks and bosom. She was raped by men who wanted to "experience" her. While she was seen as a freak and not somebody to be desired her constant exposure and abuse demonstrates the fascination that whites had for a Black woman. Not only have these stars been on display for whites, but they have been put there by whites. So, Black women are arguably being exploited for profit in the same way that Baartman was exploited for her freedom. Reality television serves as the 21st century version of putting Black people in "freak shows" for white entertainment while not providing valuable means for improvement.

Yet, reality television is not all bad. Though these women may be exploited, they are able to create a platform and promote their own personal brand. When looking at stars like Cardi B. and Amara La Negra (from the *Love and Hip-Hop* series), both have been able to jumpstart their careers in music and beyond. Before being on *Love and Hip Hop: New York* Cardi B. was famous from Instagram partially for being a comedic voice as well as being a stripper. In her quest to become a rapper she joined the franchise and her shining personality instantly made her a star on and off the series. Within the course of the year Cardi B.'s short stint on the franchise allowed her to become a Grammy nominated, Billboard chart-topping artist. She is the first female rapper to have a solo number one song on the billboard charts in the 21st century (Trust, 2017). The level of fame that she has received has now extended far beyond

Instagram and being able to be seen on mainstream television brought her a new audience. Because of her quick rise to fame Cardi B. has been seen as a positive role model despite her several fights on the show. However, she has been able to differentiate herself from the other stars because she came on the show and was able to transition off and succeed in achieving her goals. With this sentiment being expressed multiple times it became obvious that many find reality television as something that lacks longevity. Its fleeting period is meant to allow people to move on because it is not deemed as quality work. Yet, the success that some are able to achieve, like Cardi B., keeps drawing people back.

Amara La Negra, a *Love and Hip-Hop: Miami* cast member, seems to be doing what Cardi B did a mere year ago. While this show has only had one season it still seems to be able to have a positive impact on some careers. As a dark-skinned, Afro-Latina woman she has been able to bring to light the problems that Afro-Latinas experience regarding colorism and acceptance within the Latinx community. Having been featured on the show her music has been able to reach a wider audience than it has been before. Furthermore, she seems to not be engaged in as much drama as the other cast members allowing the audience to truly focus on her music. However, where she is able to take this entrance into mainstream media will be dependent on what she does in the next few years. What La Negra has been able to do is teach those that are not part of the Latinx community what Afro-Latinas may face and recognize the similarities within other groups of the African diaspora. One participant noted that she had no idea the struggles that Afro-Latinas, particularly dark-skinned women, faced in their personal life let alone the entertainment industry. This shows how reality tv can be a positive platform not only for the people participating but for those engaging with it as well.

The success of the two aforementioned women would not be possible if not for the success mid-2000s star Tiffany Pollard, infamously known as “New York”. New York got her start on *The Bachelor* styled show *Flavor of Love* where 20 women competed for the love of Public Enemy hypeman, Flavor Flav. While New York competed on two seasons and lost them both her personality and charisma allowed her to have several spin-off shows and guest features on scripted television shows. New York’s rise to fame followed along the lines of the modern-day Jezebel, “the freak. She over-exerted her sexual attraction to Flavor Flav and was constantly engaging in altercations with other cast members in hopes of “winning”. These antics, while ridiculous, propelled her to fame and changed the way that Black women would be able to achieve success on reality television. She was a pioneer in the market and her influence is seen throughout the types of television and characters that are present today. The massive success that she had propelled her to be able to revive her reality television career and continue to find success in a new decade.

Success in the way that Cardi, Amara, and New York have been able to achieve it is uncommon to the average person. And while each interviewee easily separated themselves from the cast members of shows like “Love and Hip-Hop,” all but one participant watched the “Love and Hip-Hop” franchise. This demonstrates that there are some common interests that exist between their own lives and these shows which draw them to continue watching. The use of hip hop culture, which has grown to be a substantial part of mainstream American culture, is at the forefront of this show more so than other reality television shows. Young, Black, college educated women may be more cognizant of the media they are consuming compared to the average American. Yet, when actually looking at the content of what is being shown it is hard to

believe that there are truly no subliminal factors at play. The impact that media is able to have cannot be lost upon Black women and though they may realize that the media does not truly represent them they are still able to feel the effects.

While the overall sentiment was that the women are being exploited on reality television, being able to frequently see Black women on television is something that has not been seen before. Though the representation is poor, it is positive to be able to see more Black women in television. Yet, when there is a lack of diversity in behavior, Black women continue to be seen as a monolith. It could be argued that this is as bad as Black women not being represented at all. It was brought to light a few times in the course of the interviews that Black women are not the only ones that are featured in such a negative light on these shows. While this is true, the history of the presentation of Black women and that of white women in American history are vastly different which means that when it is presented contemporarily history must be taken into consideration. With different societal expectations for Black and white women while both groups can act in the same manner on national television there tend to be different outcomes and impacts for each group.

So, if these college educated Black women are aware of what reality television represents, and it is not them, what draws them back? As one woman put it, "If you're not a messy person, then it provides a space for an alternate reality. You can see drama that you otherwise would never be involved in". By engaging in this so-called reality television, viewers are actually able to disengage from their own lives because what is being shown is not the reality that they, themselves, are familiar with. Black women have rarely seen themselves represented in media, so being able to relate to media that does not represent them is not a

foreign concept. Black women continuing to consume this media is not shocking when considering that, historically, reality television continues to perpetuate what has been seen and does not stray from the status quo.

Throughout history, Black people and women specifically have needed to stand together in order to incite change. Several participants believed that Black women requesting change would be able to positively impact the type of media that we see. Yet, on these shows Black women are hardly ever able to get along for an extended period of time. The element of sisterhood which is typically present in people's personal lives is often lacking on these shows. This is not to say that all Black women need to be able to get along, this is unrealistic. However, when 30+ year old women are constantly subjecting themselves to arguments and can never get along with their cast-mates, one begins to wonder if sisterhood can actually exist in the context of reality television. And, if Black women are serious about creating change in the type of content that is displayed it is necessary that as a community they work together to create the types of changes that they wish they desire. However, the power that is needed to create this content is not something that Black women as a collective have which makes the necessity of community even more important.

Majority of the interviewees could not find positive representations of women in reality television though some did exist. Among them, were Kandi Burrese, the cast from *Married to Medicine* (sometimes), and Teyana Taylor were all names brought up multiple times. While it was sometimes a struggle for the group to pull these few names together it was much easier to think of names from scripted series. However, similar to reality television the list of names that they were able to give was not diverse as programming in both spheres is still limited. Among

these names, Kerry Washington's "Olivia Pope" and Viola Davis' "Annalise Keating" were most often listed. These characters both exist under Shonda Rhimes' production. They are two of the few characters that allow Black women to be center stage in primetime television. These two women are highly educated and symbolize power—something that differs from the portrayals of Black women on reality television. Their power is often times connected in being able to manipulate and control their white counterparts. This is something that has not been often seen in media, in general, and is definitely not showcased in reality programming, today. The type of balance that these two figures are able to provide is important in the grand scope of things. While these two are not the only Black women that are featured in cable programming they are two of the most recognized. Both characters serve to represent a well-rounded Black woman. As one contributor noted, "Annalise has a lot of pain but you still see a woman that took the steps she needs to take [by going to Alcoholic Anonymous meetings] ... the fact that she doesn't always have time to deal with her trauma is realistic and relatable. You are able to see more of an identity than just an "Angry Black Woman". The complexity of characters like Annalise Keating and Olivia Pope are not presented in reality television. Yet, these types of dynamics are needed because they demonstrate the true lives of Black women. The typical, one-dimensional portrayal of Black women that is often seen can continue to provide entertainment yet, there needs to be media that is produced to remedy it. However, in both scripted and non-scripted shows some women felt like they weren't represented at all. The everyday Black woman, who is not necessarily put together and is living a middle-class or below life is not often presented.

When asked if they saw reality television as a space that promotes Black womanhood positively or a space that potentially can in the future the results were overwhelmingly depressing. While several women believed that there could be a time where reality television could become a positive space the means to get there always seemed out of reach. The sad fact is that the average life is not perceived as entertaining enough to be on television. As one woman noted, “Black women need to stand together and create a sense of community. Too often the Black woman is just pitted against the Black community [if she wasn’t] then the ratings would probably go down because it would not cause drama”. While reality television is called “reality” the true real lives of Black women are not showcased. The stereotypes which are presented are more entertaining and align with what people believe and think to be true rather actual truth.

This is particularly dangerous when it is recognized that reality television allows people to “people watch” and learn how Black people interact in society and how they socialize (Tyree 2011). When reality television is not representative but is used as a tool to inform society it demonstrates the power that media has and how media needs to be presented as counter culture or viewed from an oppositional gaze as it negatively impacts those that it is meant to represent. When Black female viewers recognize that this is not their reality, as they are from a different class background, engage in sisterhood, and are pursuing a higher education among other things, they are once again not represented in media. When there is not a proper balance it causes black women to continue receiving the short end of the stick.

Conclusion

Reality is defined by Merriam-Webster as “the quality or state of being real”. However, it is also defined as “a television programming that features videos of actual occurrences – often used arbitrarily”. While the first definition implies that reality is the truth; the 21st century definition just states that the actions need to be recorded in real time. What this implies is that what the audience may see on TV does not actually have to be real. As was seen with the 12 interviews and the literature reality TV is not reality for these Black women. It is just a modern-day perpetuation of the old stereotypes of the Mammy, Jezebel and Sapphire. While the images have evolved over time at the core they remain the same. The women that are featured on these shows have all reached some level of success in their own right. Yet, as determined by the group they are not exhibiting autonomy and are instead falling victim to capitalism and patriarchy as they are being exploited in order to achieve individual success, at times at the expense of others.

It is clearly evident that those with power (producers) whether Black or white will use the bodies of Black women for their personal success. As has always been, there is a blatant disregard for how Black women are treated, on these shows, and represented to the masses. With millions of viewers the impact of these programs is massive but nothing is being done to truly represent the people that seem to be presented. When Black women are finally represented on TV, with different complexions and body types that vary from the thin, Eurocentric norm it is important that diversity continues to exist. Diversity, not only within physical appearance but within characteristics and interests as well. Society needs to

understand that Black women are not a monolith so in order to truly represent the Black woman in television various depictions need to be shared.

The Black women interviewed know that they do not have the privilege to be properly represented. This does not mean that they are not able to relate to certain people that they see on TV. What it does mean is that they know that there are limits to how they are represented and they do not have to fall into the stereotypes that are presented to them. When media has the ability to shape society's understanding of identities and minorities often do not have the ability to shape their own identities proper representation is necessary. The way in which white audience member may engage with the programming may be similar to a Black audience member's engagement as both are likely far removed from the lifestyle that is presented; a lifestyle which includes grown women constantly fighting and continuously being lied on and to by intimate partners, while potentially living beyond their means. Yet, the privilege that Black viewers don't have is that due to the lack of programming to balance this could be the only way that other members of society may view them.

Reality television allows the Jezebel, Sapphire, and Mammy to continue to exist in a way that is palatable to a millennial audience with easier access to information than ever before. The knowledge of this, even if not explicit, halts Black female viewers from truly relating to those they see on television. Having access to various types of media at one's fingertips forces television companies to create content that will best attract and maintain an audience. The drama that is presented on reality television has been shown to be successful in doing this. Society needs to shift so that other depictions are seen as entertaining allowing various types of Black women to be presented. While we work to reach that position it is important to support

the Black women, such as Cardi B. and Amara La Negra, who are working to create platforms within a society where spaces for them are always earned and never given. In this acceptance, it is important to keep in mind hooks' oppositional gaze when consuming such programming because until other programming begins to exist, at large, the Black woman will continue to be disrespected as her worth and vast amount of qualities will continue to be overlooked.

Table 1

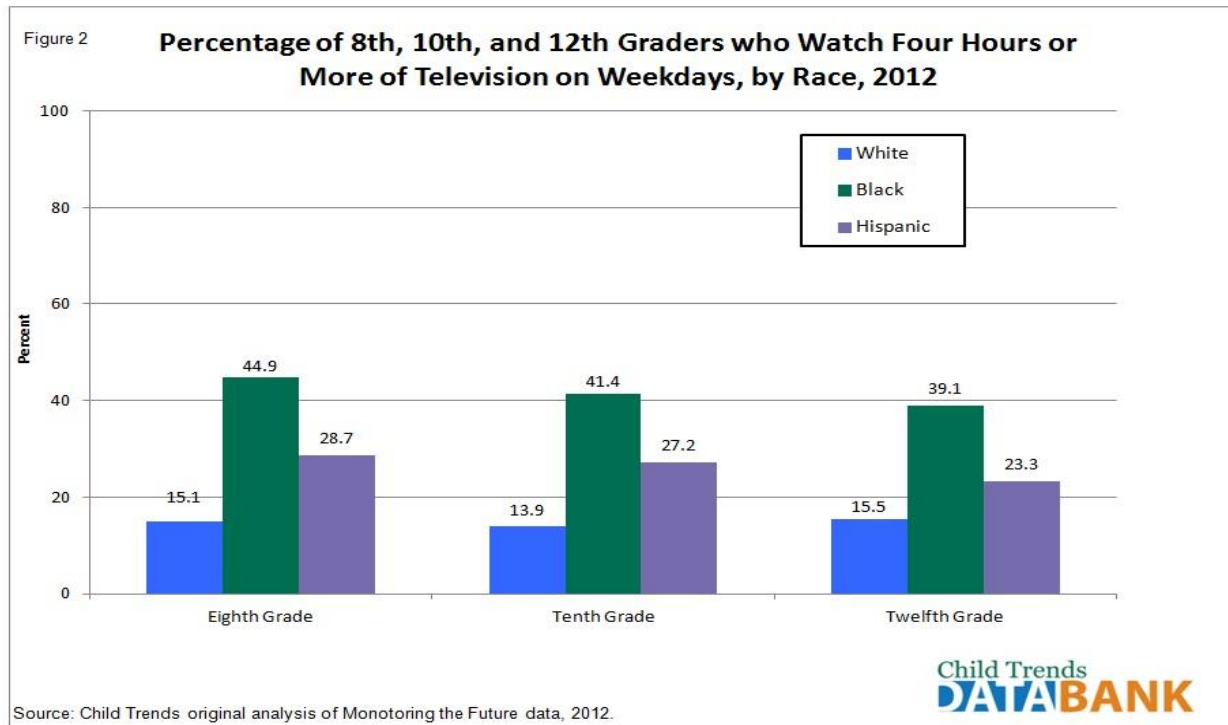
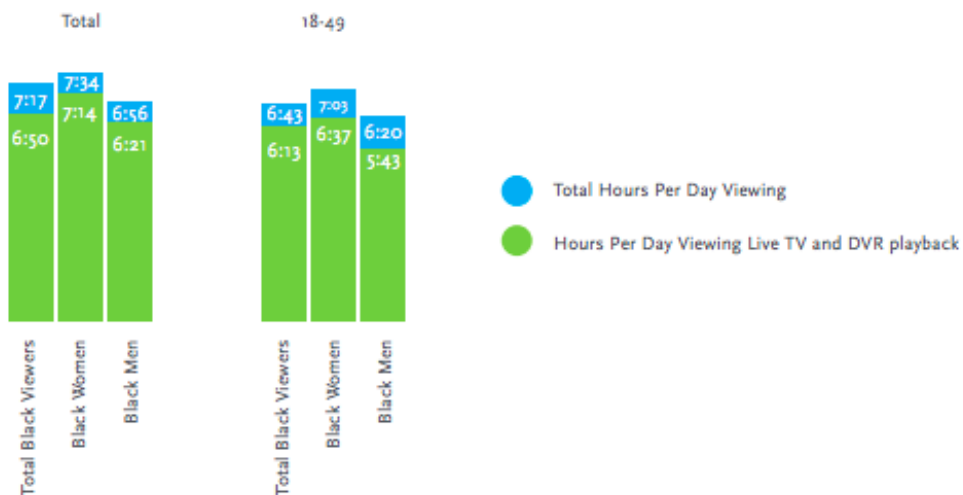


Table 2



Source: Nielsen 12/31/2012 to 6/30/13, Total Hours Spent Viewing includes Live TV viewing, DVR Playback, DVD Playback and Video Game Consoles

Table 3

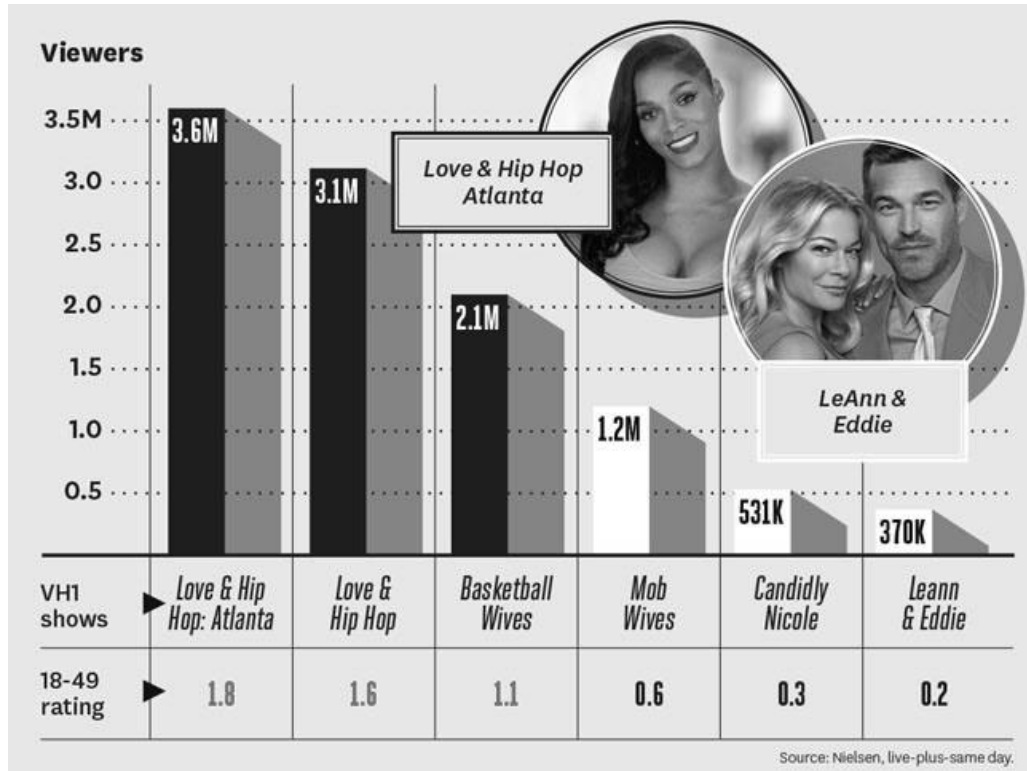


Table 4

BLACKS' TOP FIVE PREFERRED NETWORKS

| CHANNEL/ NETWORKS | % BLACK VIEWERS | TOTAL BLACK VIEWERS |
|----------------------|-----------------|------------------------|
| BET | 84% | 327 |
| VH1 | 59% | 144 |
| TV ONE | 87% | 107 |
| BOUNCE TV | 83% | 91 |
| CENTRIC | 85% | 49 |

Source: Nielsen 12/31/2012-6/30/2013, Total Day, L+7 Projections
Average number of viewers in thousands

Table 5

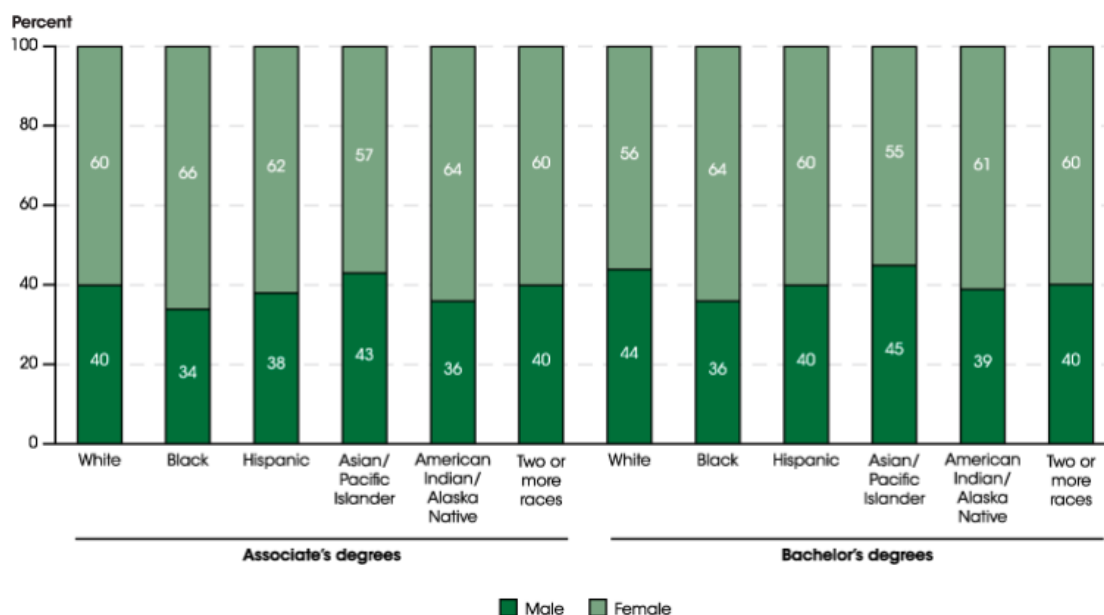
PRIMETIME PROGRAMS

| PROGRAM | ORIGINATOR | TOTAL VIEWERS AA 18-49 |
|----------------------------|------------|---------------------------|
| Love & Hip Hop Atlanta 2 | VH1 | 2.1 |
| Scandal | ABC | 2.1 |
| Real Husbands of Hollywood | BET | 1.7 |
| Real Housewives of Atlanta | BRAVO | 1.4 |
| T.I. and Tiny 3 | VH1 | 1.4 |
| The Game 6 | BET | 1.4 |
| Love & Hip-Hop 3 | VH1 | 1.4 |
| Hit the Floor | VH1 | 1.2 |
| American Idol – Wednesday | FOX | 1.1 |
| Black Ink Crew | VH1 | 1.0 |

Source: Nielsen 12/31/2012-6/30/2013, Prime Day Part, Live +7 Days, Persons 18-49, excluding specials, sports events and award shows. Viewers shown in millions.

Table 6

Percentage distribution of associate's degrees and bachelor's degrees awarded by degree-granting postsecondary institutions, by race/ethnicity and sex: Academic year 2013–14

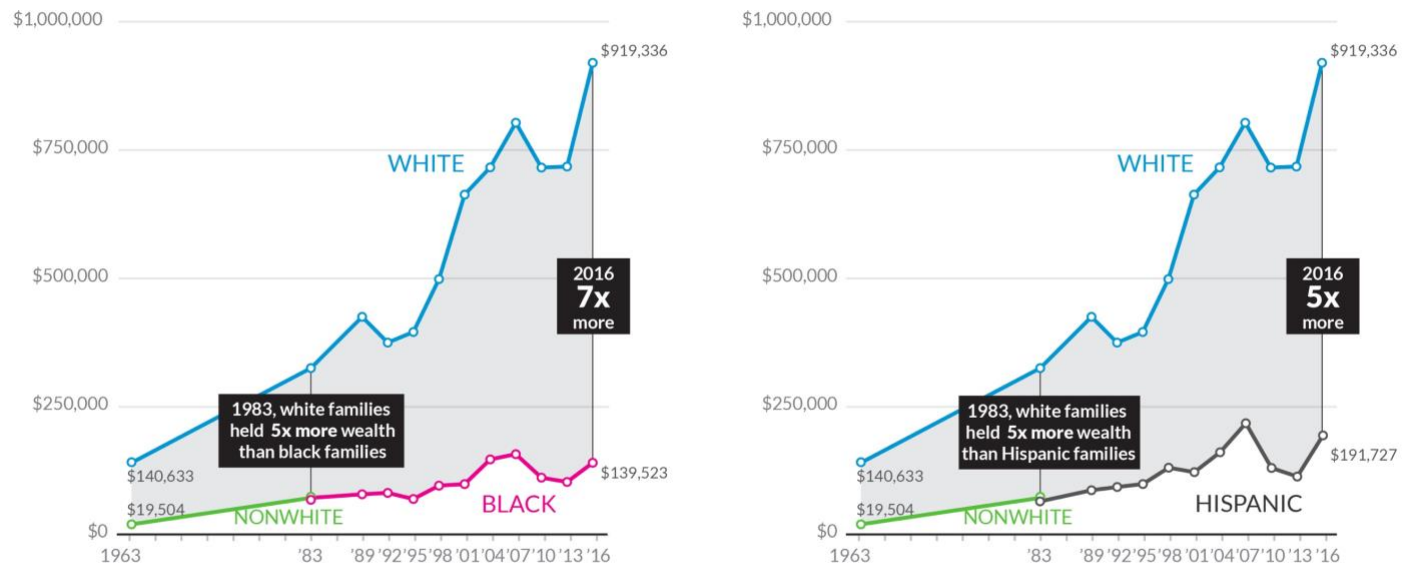


NOTE: Degree-granting institutions grant associate's or higher degrees and participate in Title IV federal financial aid programs. Data include only U.S. citizens. Race categories exclude persons of Hispanic ethnicity. Detail may not sum to totals because of rounding.

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. (2017). *Status and Trends in the Education of Racial and Ethnic Groups 2017* (NCES 2017-051), *Degrees Awarded*.

Table 7

Average Family Wealth by Race/Ethnicity, 1963–2016



Source: Urban Institute calculations from Survey of Financial Characteristics of Consumers 1962 (December 31), Survey of Changes in Family Finances 1963, and Survey of Consumer Finances 1983–2016.

Notes: 2016 dollars. No comparable data are available between 1963 and 1983. Black/Hispanic distinction within nonwhite population available only in 1983 and later.

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